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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Recurvirostridae (Avocets and Stilts)

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FAMILY RECURVIRO-
TRIDAE (AVOCETS AND
STILTS)



American Avocet

American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*

Breeding Status: A summer resident in the western portions of the region, extending locally eastwardly to extreme western Minnesota (Lyon, Stevens, Otter Tail, Lac qui Parle, and Big Stone counties), eastern South Dakota, central Nebraska, central Kansas (Finney, Barton, and Stafford counties), northwestern Oklahoma (Harper, Woods, and Alfalfa counties), and the western panhandle of Texas.

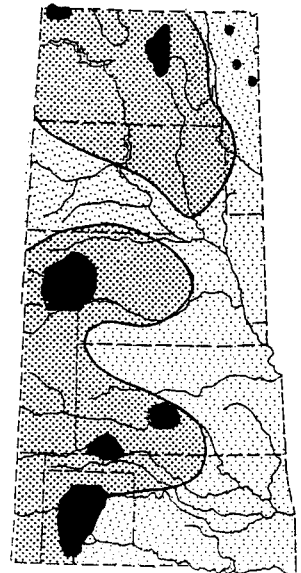
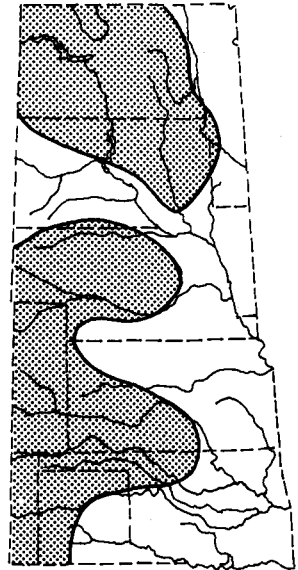
Breeding Habitat: In North Dakota, breeding is usually limited to areas of shallow water with exposed and sparsely vegetated shorelines, most often associated with alkaline to subsaline water areas. Of 253 pairs studied, the largest number were found on strongly saline alkali ponds and lakes, and very few occurred on freshwater ponds and lakes.

Nest Location: Nests are found on mud flats, sandbars, and islands, often only slightly above the water surface and with little or no associated vegetation. The nest is a simple scrape, with a lining of materials found in the immediate vicinity, and is most extensively lined in areas subject to flooding. Nests are often in loose colonies near favored foraging areas.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 4 eggs (17 North Dakota nests averaged 3.1), typically 4 in completed clutches. The eggs are buffy to olive buff with many darker spots. The eggs are laid at approximately daily intervals, and the incubation period averages about 24 days but varies from 22 to 29 days. Single-brooded, but replacement clutches have been reported.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates range from May 12 to July 5, and dependent young have been seen from June 9 to July 27. Kansas egg records are from May 11 to June 20, with a modal egg-laying date of June 5. Oklahoma egg dates are from May 15 to June 21, and Texas egg records extend from May 6 to July 13.

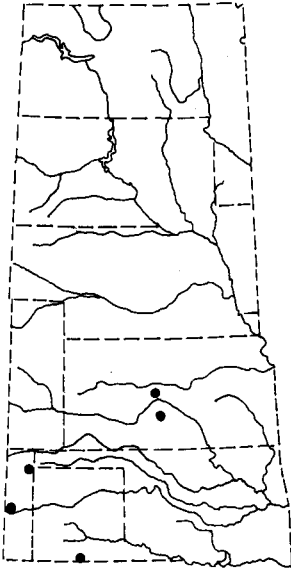
Breeding Biology: In Oregon, avocets arrive on their breeding areas 15–20 days before egg-laying, to establish territories and perform precopulatory courtship. They apparently form pairs in late winter, without associated elaborate posturing. Copulation is preceded by a rather simple breast-preening ceremony that may be initiated by either bird. Pairs form close bonds and forage together as well as defend their territory as a unit. Both sexes develop incubation patches and begin to incubate their clutch as soon as it is completed. Early in incubation the male spends more time on the nest than the female, but the female is more attentive later on. The eggs hatch over a 1 or 2 day period, and the young soon become very active, feeding themselves from the outset.



They fledge in 4-5 weeks and thereafter the families begin to form flocks.

Suggested Reading: Gibson 1971; Hamilton 1975.

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*



Breeding Status: A casual breeder in the southwestern portions of the region. Reported breeding in Union County and eastern San Miguel County, New Mexico. Apparently a rare summer visitor in eastern Colorado, western Kansas, western Oklahoma, and the panhandle of Texas, but with known breeding records only from central Kansas (Cheyenne Bottoms, 1976, 1978; Quivera N.W.R., 1978), and Hale County, Texas, in 1978.

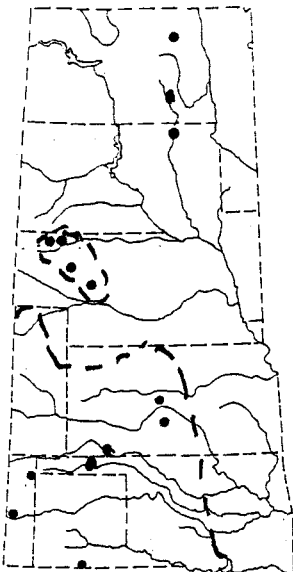
Breeding Habitat: In inland sites this species breeds around shallow alkali ponds and lakes, but it also is found coastally around brackish and freshwater ponds, on rice plantations, and in other habitats.

Nest Location: Nests are in small colonies, usually of about 6-10 nests, often in grass hummocks and always close to foraging areas. The nest may even be surrounded by water, on a floating platform of sticks and vegetation. At times the eggs are laid in a simple scrape with no lining.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Normally 4 eggs, sometimes 3 and rarely 5. The eggs are buffy to sandy with blackish blotches. The incubation period is 25-26 days. Single-brooded, but probably a renester.

Time of Breeding: New Mexico egg records are from May 12 to June 1. In Texas, eggs have been found from April 16 to June 28, and downy chicks have been reported as late as August 1.

Breeding Biology: Like avocets, stilts form pair bonds gradually and without associated elaborate displays, through the persistent association of a female with a particular male, in spite of initial aggressiveness by the male. Stilts defend territories on their breeding grounds better than avocets do and advertise them by aerial displays. Copulation in stilts is preceded by slight ritualized breast-preening by both sexes, apparently identical to that of avocets. Nest-building is probably done by both sexes, and materials are added to the nest through incubation. In periods of rising water the nest may be raised considerably by such added materials, and both sexes apparently share incubation about equally. Incubation begins when the last or penultimate egg is laid, and (in the laboratory) lasts 25 days. The eggs hatch relatively synchro-



nously, and the young remain in the nest no more than 24 hours. They are probably brooded for at least a week, and are independent at about 4 weeks.

Suggested Reading: Hamilton 1975; Stout 1967.

